

Gabe Rousseau, PhD — Human Factors Psychologist

PEDAL PUSHING

Gabe Rousseau, PhD, a team leader for Safety Operations at the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) within the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), is proof that a doctorate in psychology can take your career down any road you wish.

Since his previous role as the Livability Team Leader and Bicycle and Pedestrian Program Manager at FHWA, he's always been passionate about getting people out of their car and on their feet or bike for their next road trip. It's a winning strategy for health and the environment.

And as a human factors psychologist, identifying the winning strategy is paramount. Like others in this subfield, Rousseau applies what he knows about human behavior to help businesses design products, systems and devices that keep our lives highly functioning.

But many areas lack safe and accessible walkways or bike paths. Some people may not be capable of walking or riding without accommodations, and others may have concerns about their safety. Rousseau helps address these and other issues with the hope that he can make the world and its inhabitants a healthier and safer place.

Some of his duties include:

- Overseeing programs to make it safer for people to walk and bike for transportation;
- Working on policy and guidance used by states to improve facilities for pedestrians and bicyclists;
- Serving on national and international panels to improve safety and convenience for pedestrians and bicyclists; and
- Working on issues related to universal design so disabilities do not limit transportation options.

"In this age in which climate change is a huge challenge and there is an obesity epidemic, I feel that I'm working on research and policies that can have a substantial impact on the quality of life and health on this planet," says Rousseau.

OUTSIDE THE LINES

Before Rousseau began his unusual career path, he thought he would likely end up in academia. Through connections at the University of Georgia, however, he became acquainted with the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society, exposing him to other avenues for using his degree, such as those in aviation, military affairs and usability testing — where scientists evaluate a product or service by testing it with the individuals specifically for whom it is designed to identify flaws or areas for improvement.

This exposure broadened his horizons as to what he could do with his degree, but, "I still felt like I'd be a traitor if I left academics," he says. "I applied for several academic positions, but I probably did so half-heartedly because I knew it wasn't what I was looking for."

After a couple of jobs in private industry, one with a human factors consulting group and another with a government contractor, Rousseau took a job with the federal government, working his way up within the DOT.

He admits that when he first earned his degree, he had no idea that he'd be in his current position or would like it so much. This taught him a very valuable lesson, he says: "Don't pigeonhole yourself. Follow what interests you and don't feel like your fate is sealed with your first job."

Rousseau offers encouragement for others coming out of school with similar career ambitions, or even undefined career ambitions.

"There are incredible opportunities for people who have backgrounds in human behavior-related fields," he says. He had no idea his career track was even an option, but adds, "I have enjoyed the path I've been on."



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HUMAN FACTORS AND ENGINEERING PSYCHOLOGY

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